After midnight

Mercedes Lackey

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

AFTER MIDNIGHT

The Author woke up, knowing that she was not alone.

Simply opening her eyes proved that her instinctive feeling was correct. The bed was enveloped in a seafoam-colored, glowing mist. Surrounding the bed were dozens of people.

All were costumed more-or-less outlandishly. Some looked irritated, some angry, but none were happy. All were familiar.

"Oh, awake at last, are you?" asked a handsome man with silver-streaked hair and silver eyes, who just happened to be the spitting image of actor Michael Praed. "It's about time. We have a few bones to pick with you."

The Author scooted herself up into the headboard, trying to get as far away from the mob as possible, and addressed the speaker. "Um—Vanyel—before you say or do anything rash, I think you should know that you're probably one of the most popular characters in my books—"

Vanyel snorted. "Popular. Popular! And that's supposed to make up for what you did to me? It's not enough to give me the family from Hell, it's not enough to make me gay in a hostile redneck society, oh no, you've got to kill off my first love in the first book and make me go an entire trilogy pining after him, like some kind of medieval soap opera! And then you write me

dialogue that sounds like a Morrissey record!"

Someone in the background snickered, and chanted to the tune of "London Bridges"—"I'm depressed and so I whine, so I whine, all the time, I'm depressed and so I whine, my name's Vanyel."

Vanyel spun around and glowered at the offending party, and another speaker took advantage of the momentary distraction to step forward.

"Like he's got problems?" said Diana Tregarde, a young woman dressed in jeans and a leotard, whose long, dark hair managed to look as if it had come straight from the hands of an Uberstylist. "You give me a vampire for a boyfriend, you end the third book on a cliffhanger, and then what? You drop me like a hot potato!"

"At least you got a third book," mumbled Jennifer Talldeer, who could easily have been Diana's Native American twin sister.

"Yeah, well none of you had to spend a few centuries as a forest," Vanyel countered. "A forest! I ask you! You think athlete's foot is bad, ever tried root rot? Hah!"

"You had Stefan and Yfandes with you," the Author ventured timidly.

"Oh great, so how, exactly, am I supposed to get it on with my

true love when we're both a bunch of trees?" Vanyel snarled.

"Cross-pollinating?" someone offered from the back.

"At least you got a true love—and a whole life," complained Lavan Firestorm. "I get what—a talking horse and a nice tombstone? Thank you so very friggin' much!" His tone turned mocking. "And then you brag about it! `The Lackey patented formula for success—make your audience identify with and care deeply for a character then drop a mountain on him!'"

A tall, blond woman snorted. "Teenagers! What would you know? I have a perfectly reasonable life as a mercenary—hellfires, I have my own company! It's looking like comfortable retirement-city! Then Ms White-Horses-On-The-Cover

rips it all up and turns me into some kind of do-gooder in a uniform like a walking target and inflicts me with crap that talks in my head! I'm ready for menopause, and she starts with this nonsense!"

"Well, if you're going to start in on that line of thought," interrupted another woman, this one in black armor and silver hair, who had a face like an axe-blade. "Let me tell you, it was no picnic being saddled with arthritis and teaching you and your little buddy!"

"And thanks so much for turning me from a heroine into the prime bitch-slut of the millennium!" called a young woman in the rather idealized costume of a Russian czarina, who stood on tiptoe at the back of the room.

"You didn't deserve Ivan anyway," snapped another in a gown of glowing feathers. "All you ever do in the ballet is stand around and wait for rescue!"

"Speaking of ballet," Prince Siegfried interrupted. "I know you had to do something with the character, but did you have to make me into such a selfish bastard? Selfish, fine, bastard, all right, but both at once? And if you ask me, you really didn't pull off my so-called redemption very convincingly...."

"Nobody asked you," murmured Odile, who earned a glare from Odette.

"Don't tell me you've got a complaint!" the Author exclaimed indignantly. "You got the title and a happy ending! Not bad for someone who's best known for thirty-two fouettes in the last act!"

"But did it have to be Benno?" Odile countered. "The guy who never does anything but lift Odette so the Prince won't put his back out?"

"Hey!" said Siegfried indignantly.

The Author glanced quickly around. "I don't see Maya or Peter Scott," she murmured with relief.

"Oh, I say!" Lord Peter Almsley waved from the back of the crowd. "You still haven't planned a book for me! You just can't leave

me dangling as a hanger-on—"

"She left me dangling after three books!" countered Diana Tregarde.

"Look, it's not her fault that some nutcases decided you were real!"

"My knee hurts. Whose dream sequence is this, anyway? My knee shouldn't hurt in my own dream sequence. Shar?" said Tannim plaintively.

A graying, indomitable figure in Herald's Whites stepped forward, and the rest of the group stepped back a pace as she placed herself between the author and the mob. She put her hands on her hips and took a deep breath to begin an oration.

"Uh oh," Kerowyn groaned. "I know that look."

"Have any of you ever bothered to think about an author's responsibilities?" asked Herald-Chronicler Myste. "They aren't just to you, the characters—face it, if that were the case, every one of you would have wonderful lives full of adventures that never got you into trouble...."

A black gryphon in the back put up a talon and rumbled, "Yes, please. I'd like that."

Myste glared at the offending party. "....and ended so happily that people would gag! Right?"

There arose a murmur from the crowd, tones that sounded to the Author's ears like grudging agreement.

"Furthermore," Myste continued, "If that was what she wrote, nobody would ever bother to read it!"

A tiny woman with curly chestnut hair, also in Herald's Whites, nodded agreement. "I hate to say this, folks, but Myste is right. I started out that way—and if that was the way I'd stayed, none of us would ever have been published." She spared a slightly sour glance for the Author. "I could have done without the crushed feet, though."

"Oh sure, crushed feet. That's a limp through the park compared to root rot," Vanyel murmured indignantly. "I'm not even going to start on how

Japanese Beetles and Dutch Elm Disease feel."

The Author winced. "Sorry, Talia. I'd just read this book on medieval tortures...and you were in my first book. I hadn't figured out where to stop with the research yet."

"All right, all right—" Myste interrupted, before anyone else could start lodging complaints again. "That'll do. The point is, the author hasn't got much in the way of responsibility towards you, the characters, except to make you interesting enough that people will want to read about you. Her responsibility is always towards the audience, the readers."

"I would have preferred—" the black gryphon began to rumble.

"All of you would have preferred something else," Myste said, cutting him off. "Think about this, while you're preferring. Look at the kind of job she's got in front of her. She's got to juggle real-life problems, some of them just as grim as the ones she put you through, somehow manage to get books written and turned in on time—"

"Mostly on time," interrupted a blue dragon from beside the black gryphon.

"All right, mostly. And she's got to figure out how to do things with you that she hasn't done before, so the readers don't get bored! Now do you think any of you could do that?" Myste crossed her arms over her chest and glared at them. "And give you happy endings as well?"

"Mostly," said Lavan Firestorm, but without much anger.

"Tragedy," Myste countered, with great dignity, "Is generally considered to be more compelling than any other dramatic force."

"I could have done with being a little less compelling," several male leads said in unison, then looked at each other.

"Oh?" Lavan replied. "Is `compelling' supposed to make up for getting dead before I ever got laid?"

"Teenagers," Myste and the Author mumbled together, and exchanged a

knowing glance.

"And do you think she doesn't suffer as much as you do in all of this?" Myste continued. "The amount of facial-tissue this woman goes through—not to mention cola—! The long nights, the frenzied sessions at the keyboard? Van, she didn't have a life when she was writing you —you were her life! Everything you people feel, she feels! Oh, maybe not the physical torture—"

"I did work for American Airlines," the Author murmured.

"—but she goes through the same emotions, or she couldn't write all of yours so well! Did you ever think of that?"

"Yeah but—" Lavan started another objection, then looked around.

But the rest of the crowd seemed to be talking it over among themselves, and even Vanyel tapped Lavan on the shoulder and drew him into a four-way colloquy with Stefan and Talia. A line of limping, scorched, arrow-pincushioned or just plain exhausted blue-eyed white horses just sighed from the sidelines. The Author began to relax, as one by one, the characters turned away from the bed and its contents, and wandered off into the green haze. Eventually, there was no one left but Myste and the Author.

The Author heaved an enormous sigh of relief. "My god, you saved my ass," she said, sincerely, but rather without the grace she

usually showed in her prose.

"Well, I am you," Myste shrugged. "Lucky for me, they haven't caught on yet. On the whole, you've done rather well at not putting yourself in your books, though. That's pretty admirable."

The Author shrugged and blushed a little. "Is there anything I can do to thank you?" she asked.

Myste raised one eyebrow, an expression cloned straight from the author's own face. "Well...I don't suppose I could get a walk-on in the next book, could I?" she asked.

The Author considered it. "I don't see why not," she said cautiously. "There's room. But I'd have to figure out why you're permanently at the Collegium."

"Not another missing leg in the Tedrel Wars," Myste snapped. "You've done that. Twice."

"Er," replied the Author guiltily, because she'd been considering it. Then she brightened. "I know! And every fan-kid in glasses would love it! You're myopic!"

"Nearsighted? Can't that be Healed?" Myste asked dubiously.

The Author shook her head in triumph. "Nope. Established canon. Healers can't Heal genetic defects; they work on the existing pattern of the DNA and—"

"Enough!" Myste interrupted, holding up her hand. "That's the stuff the readers don't need to know. But you've got the Artificers; surely they'd have come up with glasses by now. You've got good optics established canonically."

"In the Field?" the Author countered.

"Well...they'd probably have to have big wooden frames and straps that went around the back of the head...they'd look like dorky sports-goggles, but they'd work."

The Author frowned. "True enough." Then her expression changed to one of glee. "But not after you went into bifocals, my dear!"

"Eh?" Myste said, puzzled. "Benjamin Franklin had them, and you're into steam-tech by now—"

"Oh no—you're me, remember? That's why I had laser-correction, bifocals made me dizzy." The Author sat back with an air of triumph.

"Point taken. Can't have dizzy Heralds, at least not in the Field." Myste nodded her satisfaction with the solution. "One other thing, though—think you could get me a boyfriend too?"

"A love-interest?" the Author asked.

"Whatever."

She frowned. "I'm not sure I want to bring in too many incidental characters. You know how they try and take over a book. Look at Almsley!"

"Oi!" objected a voice from deep in the haze.

"Use an existing one," Myste suggested.

The Author looked thoughtful. "How about Alberich?"

"Alberich?" Myste considered that. "Good body. Facial scars aren't that bad a handicap. Sexy, in a Bruce Campbell's Evil Twin sort of way. Yeah. Kind of mono-focused, though, isn't he?"

"Aren't you all?" the Author countered. "That kind of goes with the white suit."

"Along with the periodic severe bodily injuries. Point taken." Myste nodded. "Cool. Alberich it is." She frowned as a thought occurred to her. "Don't go giving me the hobby of raising fancy chickens, though."

"But I like fancy chickens," the Author said weakly.

"I know, and so will everyone else if you put it in," Myste replied. She walked off into the green haze herself, which began to close in around her. "Most excellent! I get a walk-on, a fleshing-out, and a boyfriend!"

"Love-interest!"

"Whatever."

The green haze closed down to a pinpoint, and vanished.

And once I make her really likable, I can drop a mountain on her....

Mercedes Lackey

Tulsa Oklahoma